

Commentary

In Search of the Fourth Maxim

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John W. Gardner has been a public servant since his days with the Federal Communications Commission and the Marine Corps during World War II. His posts have included President of the Carnegie Corporation and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare during the Johnson Administration; founder of the citizens' lobby, Common Cause, and founder of a leading organization in the voluntary sector, Independent Sector. He has been appointed to commissions and task forces by four presidents. His work is fueled by high energy, unwavering optimism and confidence in the ability of the American people to right what is wrong. His carefully chosen words have helped build groups, neighborhoods, hamlets and cities into thriving communities.

Dr. Gardner is a scholar and activist, eager to learn from many sources and willing to take on tough challenges. He persuades by the power of his intellect and his warmth. Family, friends, colleagues and strangers write to and visit him constantly, seeking wisdom and encouragement. He gives liberally and transmits the spark of renewal.

The Commentary we are publishing in this issue of the WESTERN JOURNAL OF MEDICINE grew from John Gardner's reflections, from his curiosity, and from an informal research project. I predict that it will be engaging, instructive and provocative—like the author.

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Editor

On a quiet summer day 22 years ago, I began the train of thought that led eventually to the search for the Fourth Maxim.

For many years I had collected proverbs, and on that day I was thinking about the remarkable brevity of some of the greatest folk sayings.

There are many memorable ones that are no longer than four words. As every student of proverbs knows, the four-words often rely on the use of balance, contrast and repetition: "Soon ripe, soon rotten," "Easy come, easy go," "Young saint, old sinner."

There are not so many three-word proverbs, but everyone can remember a few: "Misery loves company," "Love is blind," "Make haste slowly," "Que sera, sera." Some of these are thousands of years old. If you don't find yourself impressed with that fact, try making up a three-word saying that is memorable enough to last a week.

The two-word proverbs are the aristocrats of verbal brevity, and as befits aristocrats they favor the imperative mood. There are declarative two-words ("Power corrupts," "Tempus fugit") but most of the two word proverbs tell us what to do or how to live. They are maxims. "Know thyself," is perhaps the most famous.

As I reflected on these terse sayings I asked myself

"Why not a one-word maxim?" If "Know thyself" passes muster as a legitimate maxim, why not the single word "Know"? If "Be yourself" is acceptable, why not the single word "Be"?

If you continue in that experimental vein, you soon find that the most plausible one-word maxims are verbs. There are a few nouns used in the spirit of a toast—"Health!" "Fortune!" And the nouns on coats of arms—"Honor," "Veritas." But none of these have the quality of sayings. In contrast, Harry Golden's advice "Enjoy!" seems to me a perfectly appropriate one-word maxim. And like "Know" and "Be," it is a verb in the imperative mood.

If the one-word maxim is most likely to be a verb that instructs us what to do, its value will lie entirely in the soundness of the instruction given. In longer proverbs, ideas of dubious wisdom may be saved by vividness or saltiness of expression. But in one-word proverbs vividness or any other marks of style are impossible. The value of the saying will depend entirely on the meaning of the one word.

With those thoughts firmly in mind, I set out to find the choicest one-word maxims. Over weeks and months I discussed the search with many people. I put the question this way: "Suppose you were allowed to communi-

cate one word of advice to a young person living in the year 2500. What would it be?"

One word!

The results of the conversations surprised me. It turns out that there are three one-word maxims almost universally nominated for the top of the list. There is not perfect agreement as to the order of the three, so I'll list them in the order that seems appropriate to me.

The First Maxim is "Live!" I am conscious of the moral questions the maxim may arouse (There are fates worse than death, etc.), but the word—and the reality it denotes—still embraces everything else. "Live!" If you have in mind Schweitzer's "reverence for life," and a biologist's sense of the complexity and wonder of the life process, you will recognize that most people who mentioned the word had in mind more than an invitation to hedonism. Live, be, experience, grow, sense, function as a healthy organism! Everything else builds on that.

Of the three maxims most widely agreed on, another was "Learn." Learning begins before birth, and is at the heart of human behavior. It is involved in every significant act we perform.

The third of the three maxims widely agreed on is "Love!" You have discovered by now that we cannot play the game of one-word maxims without allowing each maxim to carry a lot of meanings. "Love" would have to mean many kinds of love—fraternal, sexual, religious, humanistic.

So much for the first three maxims: Live, learn and love. Readers who would like to check the results with friends will find considerable agreement on those three. But when we move beyond that point, we encounter a curious fact: though people tend to agree on the first three maxims, there is nothing approaching consensus on the identity of the fourth.

A fascinating and puzzling fact!

A devout young friend of mine says "Believe!" A scientist friend says "Seek!" A distinguished physician, the late Dr. Russell Lee, said "Produce!" I found no consensus.

Then some years ago I was to give an after-dinner talk to one of the most distinguished scholarly societies in the nation, and I decided to put the question to the assembled members. Where would I find a group of men and women better fitted to assist in the Search for the Fourth Maxim? I described the history of the search, and then supplied them with slips of paper on which to record their nominations.

What were the results?

If we can accept the judgment of this distinguished group, the Fourth Maxim is one or another word center-

ing on the cognitive processes. The group was not unanimous as to what that word would be. The words most often mentioned were:

Think
Understand
Know

If one were to draw from their responses a Fifth Maxim, it would be one or another word from the following cluster:

Give
Help
Serve
Share
Care

And I'm happy to report that their Sixth Maxim would involve a lightening of the hitherto serious mood:

Laugh
Smile
Play
Enjoy

So much for the first six maxims. In my many conversations on the subject I was invariably asked, "What is your own choice for the Fourth Maxim?" My choice would be "Aspire." In some respects I would prefer the homely word "Try," but "Aspire" says more. It says "try for something better." That seems to me the essence of humans at their best.

I won't put my choice ahead of the distinguished scholars I consulted, but I'll take the liberty of ranking "Aspire" as the Seventh Maxim.

The list now goes:

Live
Learn
Love
Think
Give
Laugh
Aspire

One's preference in maxims is of course a highly personal matter. I leave it to the reader to diagnose the two members of the audience who wrote on their slips of paper the word "Don't," and the one member who wrote "Escape!"